

# Push to reform child welfare agency stalls

[Child welfare, from AA1] don't want to do that. I'm telling them, 'How are we ever going to stabilize?'"

An audit in late 2010 found some of the agency's 18 field offices are fully staffed and produce good results, while others have vacancies and large backlogs of child abuse investigations.

The West San Fernando Valley office completed all of its investigations on time, while the Compton office missed the agency's 60-day deadline in 61% of its cases. Nearly a third of the Compton office's social workers were on the job for less than two years.

The problems were also acute in areas of South Los Angeles and Palmdale where child welfare interventions are also often more complex and many workers anxiously await a transfer following what department staffers call their "year of duty." The three offices also have some of the highest rates of children who die of abuse or neglect — a total of 17 between January 2008 and August 2010.

"High stress levels and distance from employees' homes contribute to the high staff turnover rate," the audit said.

"All of the problems we have in DCFS are magnified in these offices," Supervisor Zev Yaroslavsky said in an interview last week. "We cannot afford to have a bureaucratic traffic jam that prevents a solution to a problem that puts children at risk."

Under the county's current agreement with the union, workers are eligible for transfer after one year of service. Browning said he wants to double that time frame for at least some offices, where he is also considering a special pay boost and the ability to limit hiring to people who live in a close radius. He said he regretted that the issue couldn't be resolved in time for the peak hiring season following college graduation. As an emergency measure, Browning froze transfers and is approving them on a case-by-case basis only, but he said the arrangement may be unsustainable and vulnerable to a challenge by the union.

David Green, a social worker and negotiator for Service Employees International Union Local 721, denied that the union had agreed to a limit on transfers in workers' first two years, and he said the organization

'We cannot afford to have a bureaucratic traffic jam that prevents a solution to a problem that puts children at risk.'

— ZEV YAROSLAVSKY,  
L.A. County supervisor,  
speaking about the Children  
and Family Services agency

is not interested in opening negotiations until regularly scheduled talks later this year.

"We want to look not just at staffing, but all the factors involved, including management," Green said. "We want to look at the root cause of these things."

Green said transfers in underprivileged areas are often motivated by the workers' inability to fully help their clients because of the scarcity of outside parenting classes, drug treatment programs and other services needed to help reunite families and close cases.

"People show up to work if they work in a good supportive environment. People will do the commute for a good supportive environment," Green said.

Another union concern is that some managers in the underserved offices have poor social work practices and it might impair workers to spend too much time under them, according to SEIU spokesman Ray Pok.

"This should not devolve into a tussle between management and the union.... It's up to DCFS and the Board of Supervisors to accomplish this by creating a supportive environment with manageable caseloads, labor saving technology, proper training and appropriate working conditions," said Supervisor Mark Ridley-Thomas, who represents the Compton area and was elected with millions of dollars in labor support.

All sides agreed change is slow because of the agency's sheer size. DCFS receives 170,000 child abuse hotline calls each year — the nation's third largest caseload — and it has 7,300 employees and a \$1.8-billion budget.



# The cost of delay

6/4/12

JIM NEWTON

**I**N THE WEEKS since Juvenile Court Presiding Judge Michael Nash opened this county's dependency proceedings to the press, there have been a number of revelations about a system that, until now, has been largely shielded from scrutiny. For the first time, the public is getting a broad look at the consequences of sloppy social work, the defensiveness of lawyers used to operating in secret, the agonizing decisions of judges, even the occasional happy outcome in which a family, once torn apart, is successfully reunited.

But one overarching fact of the dependency courts, where judges supervise the lives of children in foster care, is the high and hidden cost of delay. Some cases drag on for months, even years, while children lose their chance to begin their lives in secure, safe families.

Over the last two months, I have watched one such case drag on. Judge Tim Saito presided as birth parents challenged foster parents for custody of a 2-year-old girl taken from her birth parents when she was just

a few days old because they had a previous record of abuse.

The girl was placed with a caring and quiet couple (I'm not naming them here because doing so might identify the little girl). Indeed, the decency of these foster parents is about the only uncontested fact in the case. They decided to build their family by coming to the aid of children who needed a home; just over two years ago, the county delivered them an infant girl.

The girl's birth parents, however, were unwilling to let go so easily. Though they had been forced to give up their other children after the county accused them of abuse — one infant girl suffered a broken femur, allegedly at her father's hand — they appealed for the return of their baby.

A judge could have heard evidence and decided the matter then; instead, the case kicked around the courts for more than a year, as the birth parents underwent counseling and dismissed lawyer after lawyer, each time forcing delays. Early this year, the county formally recommended that efforts at reunification be ended and that the fos-

## When dependency court appearances drag on, it's the families that pay.

ter parents be given custody.

Even then, the case dragged on. Time after time, the foster parents would be asked by Saito to appear in court. The foster father would miss a day of work — and, with it, wages. And then the day would slip away with barely any progress. One of the days I attended, Saito had asked the parties to be ready at 1:45 p.m. He didn't actually call the case until 3:55 p.m. Once inside the courtroom, the birth father again asked for a new lawyer, so the judge had to hear that matter. Ruling against that request this time, Saito resumed the trial. It lasted 20 minutes before Saito called it a day.

One afternoon, it looked as though a lot might get done. The parties were told their case would be up early because a social worker had been pulled off her job to testify. Nope. More

than two hours passed without word. The social worker, who had recently undergone back surgery, squirmed uncomfortably in the waiting area.

Speaking with me, the foster parents did not criticize Saito, but their frustration with the process almost visibly tears at them. Interrupted testimony and repeated court appearances don't harm the lawyers or social workers, the father noted; they're paid to be there. "They don't have any problem continuing," he grimly told me one afternoon while the case was yet again on hold. "They don't have any problem delaying."

But it has harmed his family in myriad ways. It costs money: The foster parents estimate they have spent the equivalent of a year's worth of college tuition on legal bills. It has cost time: They have spent more than 20 days in court since the beginning of this year alone. Most heartbreakingly, it has added another element of stress in the young life of their foster daughter. While the case has been underway, the birth parents have had visitation rights; the girl is now at an age when it's threatening to become confusing to have another set of parents to call "Mommy" and "Daddy." She could have been nestled in a loving and secure foster family months ago. Instead, she faces conflict.

Last month, Saito finally concluded that efforts at reunification should cease and that the girl should remain with the foster parents. But the birth parents are still pressing, and are allowed visits while they're appealing.

Deborah Dentler is the lawyer for the foster parents, and she's exasperated by the ordeal her clients have endured. Dentler doesn't want to discourage potential foster parents from signing up, but she's worried about a system that effectively punishes those who do. Indeed, her hope is that the press coverage allowed by Nash's order opening the courts will encourage judges and others in the system to be more mindful of those whose lives are at stake.

As Dentler noted, "Justice delayed is justice denied to families and children." In dependency court, that injustice has been inflicted all too commonly, without any accountability for those responsible.



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# Reform of child agency stalls

L.A. County areas  
with the most need  
still have the least  
experienced workers.

BY GARRETT THEROLF

More than a year ago, pledges to reform one of the nation's largest child welfare agencies followed a report showing that children in underprivileged areas of Los Angeles County receive alarmingly uneven aid. But the efforts to improve that have largely stalled.

Communities with the greatest need for services still have the least experienced child protective staff and those workers have the highest turnover rates. The agency's chief says the disparity has continued because the county and the social workers' union have been unable to agree on how best to slow the movement of employees, who are free under their labor contract to opt out of more challenging assignments, which tend to be in lower socioeconomic areas.

Philip Browning, director of the Department of Children and Family Services, said he wants the union to agree that social workers would have to remain in their positions for at least two years. "Initially, they said they would. Now they

[See Child welfare, AA6]